

For far too long, millions of American families have worried that the American dream has increasingly fallen out of reach. Too many in the middle class are just struggling to stay there. Too many who are trying to get to the middle class find the ladder up steeper and steeper.

Today, the cost of raising a family, saving for college and retirement, getting a good-paying job and affording healthcare have become very, very hard. As a result, that sunny American optimism, so key to our national identity, has been replaced by a growing sourness and divisiveness in the land. We have to do better, and we will do better.

With this legislation, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rebuild our economy and rekindle faith in America's future. It will include the largest tax cut for the middle class in a generation. It will include provisions that are both critically important and overwhelmingly popular with the American people, from strengthening childcare and education to making healthcare more affordable for millions. And, crucially, it will include unprecedented steps to fight the climate crisis and preserve our planet for the next generation.

After yet another summer marked by hurricanes, floods, and wildfires, we cannot hold off on taking action any longer. The world is looking to us for leadership on climate change. By achieving the emissions goals Democrats are laying out, we can reassert America's leadership.

And through it all, we are going to make sure that this bill is paid for and that those at the very top finally pay their fair share.

When this Senate majority began its work many months ago, our original task was to pass legislation that would get our country out of the depths of the COVID pandemic. Now, the legislation we will work on over the next 2 weeks will lay a new foundation for the future of our economy. It will restore the middle class in the 21st century and give many more Americans the opportunity to get there. Building ladders to middle class—that is what this is about, and that is what we are going to do.

The next few weeks will be crucial to achieving this goal, and I look forward to working with my colleagues to continue to deliver on our promise of big, bold change for the American people.

Of course, even as we work to deliver on our Build Back Better agenda, the House and Senate will also work on other important priorities that demand immediate attention, including passing a continuing resolution before the September 30 expiration of government funding, providing emergency funding to help those devastated by recent natural disasters, and helping resettle our Afghan allies and partners. I expect all of this to be done in a bipartisan and timely way.

Of course, over the next few weeks, the House and Senate must also come

together to address the debt ceiling. In America, when it is time to pay the bills, we follow through on our obligations, without exception. For a long time, addressing the debt ceiling was considered a routine and responsible step that both sides worked together to achieve. Even when President Trump was in office, Democrats worked three times with Republicans to suspend the debt ceiling because it was the right and obvious thing to do. We didn't pick excuses and say: Here is why we don't want to do it. We knew it was important and it was time to lay aside differences and move it forward.

But now, unfortunately, some of our Republican colleagues—even though they were eager to have Democrats support them when President Trump was President—now some of our Republican colleagues are reportedly contemplating a reckless idea, spearheaded by the Republican Senator from Wisconsin, to oppose any effort to raise the debt ceiling whatsoever. And, unfortunately and sadly, the Republican leader seems to be going along.

Let me be clear: taking the debt hostage and playing games with the full faith and credit of the United States is reckless, irresponsible, and will harm every single American. It is a complete nonstarter.

This is not just another political debate. It is about honoring our unbroken commitment to pay our debts and avoid another financial crisis at a crucial moment for our country.

Now it is important to remember that this is not about green-lighting future spending. This is about paying debt from past spending, which was incurred during the Trump administration and which received favorable votes from the majority of Republicans and Democrats.

Indeed, it is a new study that came out. According to the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, the Trump administration incurred \$5.4 trillion in new debt after the debt ceiling was raised in 2019, up through his last day of office. So all of the new \$5 trillion in debt, bottom line, was caused under the Trump administration, not by Democratic spending—under the Trump administration, \$5.4 trillion from the last day the debt ceiling was raised in 2019 to the last day of Trump being in office.

Another report by the Treasury Department further states that, over the entirety of the Trump administration, that figure rose to as high as \$8 trillion.

Again, let me repeat this so my Republican colleagues hear it loud and clear. This is not about the Democrats incurring debt. Between the last time that the debt ceiling was raised in 2019 and the final day of the Trump administration—nothing to do with Biden or Democrats or anything in 2021—his administration added more than \$5 trillion to the national debt; and over the 4 years of Donald Trump, new debt totaled as much as \$8 trillion.

So both sides—both sides—have a responsibility to pay our bills. Both sides, led by the Republican Senate, incurred much of this new debt. Senators from both parties voted overwhelmingly in support of the many laws that contributed to this obligation.

In the middle of the COVID pandemic, the Congress came together under Donald Trump, when Donald Trump was President, to pass successive COVID relief laws, like the CARES Act, the PPP extension, and the "908 COVID deal" in December. Democrats and Republicans voted in huge numbers in support of these laws. Republicans voted to make these expenditures.

Now we must come together to do the responsible thing and pay those bills. Leader MCCONNELL assured the country in 2019, when Donald Trump was President, that we would "no doubt [raise the debt ceiling] on a bipartisan basis." Again, that is what McConnell said when Trump was President: We will "no doubt [raise the debt ceiling] on a bipartisan basis." He said, when Trump was President, failure to do so would be a "disaster."

Failure to do so now, Leader MCCONNELL, is an equal disaster. It doesn't matter who is President. We still incurred the bills. So I believe it should be no different this time around.

The United States has never, ever, defaulted on its debt. I can't imagine Republicans would want to be responsible for the first-ever default. We need to work together to raise the debt ceiling and avoid causing irreparable harm to our economy, still recovering from the devastation of the pandemic.

I would say to the business community and the financial community, let Leader MCCONNELL know, stop playing games with the debt ceiling.

VOTING RIGHTS

Mr. SCHUMER. Madam President, now on one final issue, on voting. Before the Senate concluded the previous work period, Republicans blocked multiple efforts to even debate voting rights legislation in the U.S. Senate.

Let me be clear: Republicans refusing to support anything on voting rights is not an excuse for Democrats to do nothing.

Over the recess, a number of my colleagues and I, including Senators KLOBUCHAR, MERKLEY, WARNOCK, MANCHIN, PADILLA, KAINE, KING, and TESTER, worked diligently to craft a revised voting rights piece of legislation.

This compromise proposal would protect the freedom to vote, end partisan gerrymandering, stop the scourge of dark money in our politics, among many other good things.

I applaud my colleagues for their hard work and their progress to come together with a very strong voting rights bill that all Democrats can support, while respecting the role of States and promoting greater confidence in our democracy.

Now Senator MANCHIN has been having discussions with our Republican

colleagues to try and garner support for this important legislation. This is a good proposal and I encourage all my Senate colleagues to support it.

That said, we must be honest about the facts. The Republican-led war on democracy has only worsened in the last few weeks. Most notably, the Governor of Texas recently signed into law a vile new voter suppression bill that ranks as one of the most draconian and undemocratic in living memory. Meanwhile, partisans across the country are sharpening their knives for a coming spate of vicious gerrymandering, which further threatens to divide our politics.

This is unacceptable. So the Senate must act. I intend to hold a vote in the Senate as early as next week on voting rights legislation. Time—time—is of the essence.

I yield the floor.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Republican leader is recognized.

AFGHANISTAN

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, over the State work period, as Senators attended business back home, the Biden administration's reckless decision to retreat from Afghanistan was carried through to a damaging and deadly end.

The consequences of its hasty retreat were not just foreseeable; they were actually foreseen. And yet, against the advice of Members from both parties and even its own national security experts, the administration plowed right ahead.

Just weeks after abandoning our strategic airbase in the dead of night, the Biden administration told Americans and vulnerable Afghan partners they were largely on their own to make it to the commercial airport in Kabul if they wanted out of Afghanistan.

And by the White House's own admission, some of the Americans who wanted to come home were left behind. So let's let that sink in. President Biden left Americans who wanted to escape behind, in the clutches of the Taliban.

Of course, Americans aren't the only people we left behind. In order to meet an arbitrary political deadline, the Biden administration also pulled out before we helped all the brave Afghans who stuck their necks out to assist American servicemembers and build a better future for their country.

Our Nation made a promise of aid and safety in exchange for their service; and on this President's watch, we actually failed to keep the promise. We left Americans and vulnerable Afghans behind.

The administration naively expected the Taliban to behave like any law-abiding member of the so-called international community, supposedly subject to tremendous leverage for recognition and for funding.

Well, our adversaries are sending emissaries to the Taliban, and the terrorists in Kabul seem unconcerned with diplomacy. Trust in the Taliban to ensure safe passage to the airport for evacuees was fatally misplaced. Anyone who expected the group to become "inclusive" should now rightly expect to literally be laughed out of the room.

The administration confidently insisted it would own the consequences of its withdrawal efforts; but as soon as their lack of planning bore real, deadly consequences, it pointed the blame at everyone but the reflection in the mirror.

Now, in a bizarre twist of narcissism, the White House is now holding up its belated and frantic evacuations as worthy of praise and credit.

So where are we now?

A wall outside the compound that, until recently, housed the U.S. Embassy in Kabul now bears a mural of the Taliban flag. Four terrorists once detained at Guantanamo Bay now hold senior positions in the Taliban regime. And in the void left by our coalition's withdrawal, we are less able to collect intelligence and fight terrorists on their own soil.

This failure was entirely avoidable; the consequences were totally foreseeable; and the stain on our retreat has left America more endangered, less credible, and with fewer capabilities in the face of real and growing terrorist threats.

THE ECONOMY

Mr. MCCONNELL. Madam President, on another matter, the international stage isn't the only area where the Biden administration's policies have caused damage that was both foreseeable and foreseen.

Back in the springtime, Washington Democrats dumped trillions of dollars in liberal borrowing and spending onto the American people. They pretended it was a COVID relief bill. What it was, was a recipe for rampant inflation, a silent tax hike on American families.

It was clear what would happen. Even liberal economists warned this was a bad idea that would cause inflation. But just like in Afghanistan, Democrats had made up their minds long ago and were certainly not going to be deterred.

Now working Americans are paying the price. Annual inflation is up 5.4 percent, tied for the worst inflation in over a decade. It has more than swamped American workers' wage gains over the last year. The Democrats' inflation is turning American workers' pay raises into effective pay cuts, essentially pick-pocketing American families.

You might think this would give our Democratic friends some pause and encourage them to deal in reality; but, alas, that is not what is happening. Instead, they are eager to jam through yet another massive multitrillion-dollar reckless taxing-and-spending spree

in an effort to move our country to the left, literally, forever.

Massive new government intrusion into Americans' childcare arrangements, into Americans' medical prescriptions, into the power grid; new welfare spending that hands out cash with zero—zero—work requirements; socialist price setting that would leave our medical system with fewer new cures; and a thousand more awful, far-left policies just like these, all accompanied by a suite of staggering—literally staggering—tax hikes that would kill jobs, hurt families, and crush our competitiveness with the Chinese.

Details are already emerging about the seismic tax hikes that Democrats are cooking up: more higher taxes on employers and job creators, targeted tax hikes to hit small businesses and family farms, pulling more Americans into the death tax.

This tax-hiking wish list would add up to one of the biggest tax hikes in American history at exactly the time their liberal policies already have our economy sputtering. So it is the very last thing American workers need. It is the last thing American families can afford, and Republicans are going to fight these terrible, painful policies tooth and nail.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Morning business is closed.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session and resume consideration of the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read the nomination of James Richard Kvaal, of Massachusetts, to be Under Secretary of Education.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority whip.

AFGHANISTAN

Mr. DURBIN. Madam President, I rise to speak to 9/11, the 20th anniversary, but before that, I would like to address some of the remarks made by the minority leader just a few moments ago.

He discussed, in the context of the Biden Presidency, what he called a "reckless decision to retreat from Afghanistan with an arbitrary deadline." What the Senator failed to include was the efforts made last year, before Joe Biden was elected President, by the previous President, Republican Donald Trump, through his Secretary of State, Pompeo, in direct negotiation with the Taliban, to establish the deadlines for the evacuation of Afghanistan. The idea didn't come with the new President, Joe Biden; the idea started under